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ABSTRACT

Rural sociology research in the South needs to confront the question of research priorities in order to more effectively meet the needs of its various clients and publics. Review of current priorities in rural sociology reveals emphasis on research activities ordered as follows: (1) Rural Development; (2) Population Distribution; (3) Social Inequality and Disadvantaged Groups; (4) Environment and Natural Resources; (5) Agricultural Industry; and (6) Nonmetropolitan Communities. Since rural sociology is an applied field, research originates in the social problems confronted by policy makers and practitioners. Therefore, establishing criteria and procedures for setting priorities is more important than listing specific priorities. An adequate basis for determining research priorities must be grounded in the practice of rural sociology to provide continuity and focus, but not to the exclusion of future-oriented theory and methodology. The theoretical orientation of social change as applied to social organization has been largely overlooked. In order to employ the organizational orientation there must be a change in methodological emphasis to include the use of a more diverse assortment of research tools. Since the cost for such an orientation would be high, a capacity for initiating and continuing communication with potential clients must be built into the research activities. (JC)

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A NEEDED RESEARCH ORIENTATION FOR RURAL SOCIOLOGISTS IN THE SOUTH*

Southern Rural Sociology Research Committee
Subcommittee on Research Priorities

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Introduction

What research can and should rural sociologists in the Southern region do to help provide a sound knowledge base for social development in rural areas? This question was posed by the Southern Agricultural Experiment Station Directors to the Southern Rural Sociology Research Committee more than a year ago. It was a question worthy of consideration by researchers concerned with the rural South. Thus, the purpose of this statement is to treat this and related questions that arise pertinent to the identification of primary research needs.

Interest in identifying priorities for research is not new among rural sociologists. Prominent efforts to address the issue appear in several presidential addresses to the Rural Sociological Society, in the work of the Committee of Fifteen of the Rural Sociological Society (Sewell, 1950), and in a book entitled Our Changing Rural Society (Copp, 1964). Although special projects have been pursued at isolated times and places, there has not developed any major thrust toward expanding the scope of rural sociological research into critical new areas or any implementation of dramatically different theoretical and methodological orientations.

The establishment of the Southern Rural Sociology Research Committee in 1968 was at least in part a response to this type of concern for addressing the most pertinent research problems (Dunkelberger and Vanlandingham, ed., 1974). Virtually the same desire to identify research priorities was present among the Southern Directors in 1970 when they convened the Southern Task Force on Rural Development which attempted to address this issue in its discussions and report (Southern Task Force on Rural Development, 1970).

Continuing attention to problems and research priorities is essential to any maturing discipline. Rural sociology in the South has experienced

substantial growth in recent years both inside and outside the Land-grant College framework (McLean, et.al., 1975). It is relatively well organized on a regional basis and has attracted the interest of a number of important publics. The foundation has been laid. Now is the time to freshly assess current research orientations in conjunction with the most critical needs of the region and to initiate new research thrusts into heretofore neglected areas, or to attack "old" problems from different theoretical orientations.

The purpose of this report is three-fold. First, it is to review briefly the general state of rural sociology research in the South. Second, it is an attempt at presenting a rationale and set of criteria for determining research priorities. And, third, it is to suggest some needed sociological research emphases related to the practical problems of the region.

Current Research Emphasis

Review of research projects presently being conducted by rural sociologists employed in the Agricultural Experiment Stations of the Southern region reveal a strong attachment to practical problems (Southern Rural Development Center, 1974). The research projects tend to fall under one of six general problem areas. The following listing is ordered according to the amount of research activity that presently exists across the region:

1) Rural development. A broad category of problems relating to economic and human resources of rural areas as well as mechanisms for providing public services associated with a high quality of life.
2) Population distribution. The shifting numbers, characteristics and spatial distribution of people between rural and urban areas and between regions.

3) Social inequality and disadvantaged groups. Standards and levels of living along with programs and policies serving special categories and minorities.

4) Environment and natural resources. Limitations on the availability of natural resources and the societal reappraisal of valued priorities relating to standards of living.

5) Agricultural industry. Problems of agriculture such as land utilization, management practices, adoption of technology and other concerns relating to production.

6) Nonmetropolitan communities. Local institutions and the nature of their function in rural areas.

Several of these six research areas represent rather traditional ones for rural sociologists whereas others have evolved only within the last decade. Areas such as population and community have been around since the origin of the field, but the natural environment area is a rather recent problem concern. There are also several additional areas that could be identified, although they do not represent problems to which any significant research effort is presently directed.

Criteria for Determining Research Priorities

Rural sociology is an applied field in the sociology discipline and as such may be seen as a bridge between science and society (Kaufman, et.al., 1964). Being an applied field means that the impetus for research originates largely outside the discipline in the social problems confronted by policy makers and practitioners of professions involved with action programs. Al-

though the impetus for research may come from outside the field, the orientation and subject matter is of necessity sociological. The practice of sociology is a process of research and interpretation relating to societal problems. Rural sociology localizes these problems in the towns, villages and open-country sectors of society and lends visibility to problems of "macro" scope.

What relevance does this have for the selection of research priorities? It suggests that criteria for identifying priorities may be found at two levels--that of practical problems and that of sociological theory and methodology. Most classifications of research problems in the past have been derived from practice rather than from theory and method. It is the failure to approach the problem from the latter perspective that tends to frustrate the rural sociologists capabilities for resolution of pressing societal problems.

Determining research priorities is not an isolated event but a continuing process. For this reason, the establishing of criteria and procedures for setting priorities is more important than developing a listing of specific priorities. Moreover, lists of priorities defined only in terms of current rather than futuristic research run the danger of becoming dated and, if everyone's interests are considered, encyclopedic. An adequate basis for determining research priorities must be grounded in the "practice of rural sociology" in order to provide continuity and focus but not to the exclusion of theory and methodology as synthesizing vehicles for meaningful solutions.

Critique of Current Research Practice

Proposals aimed at establishing research priorities for a field such as rural sociology must be visualized within the context of existing research

practice. A critical look must be given the current situation in order to decide where a change in emphasis is required.

A general indictment against rural sociologists in the South, and to some extent against sociologists per se, is their tendency to emphasize the demographic perspective and social psychological methods which stress individual characteristics and opinions rather than efforts to deal with social organization and patterns of interaction. To date this latter perspective has been neglected in the Southern region. One reason for this relative lack of emphasis may stem from the requirement that a broader mix of methodologies is required along with a higher investment of research funds.

Low budget research is one reason rural sociologists have paid relatively little attention to the use of longitudinal and historical design and have been preoccupied with cross-sectional analyses. There is a specific need for more extensive use of longitudinal design and the accompanying emphasis on social change and stability. Solution of some pressing contemporary social problems will most likely depend on extensive change in social structure while others will depend on maintaining relative structural stability.

Abundant evidence exists to document the fact that rural sociologists in the South have not focused their research on social organization and interaction as a central concern of sociological study. Just a cursory look at social organization reveals different levels of operation ranging from the local through the state and regional to the national and international. At the same time there are different types of organizations ranging from primary groups such as the family to large secondary collectivities like labor unions and political parties. It is within this dynamic setting of

social organizations that the problems of rural people in the South must be analyzed. Change in the organization of society as it relates to rural people is the problem context with which the rural sociologist must ultimately be concerned. Such a perspective offers the greatest potential for contributing to the broad task of rural development at the present time.

Identification of social change as a prime aspect of contemporary society is one thing on which most rural sociologists agree. Social change is a general theoretical orientation that can serve as a comprehensive frame of reference for conceptualizing the problems confronted by rural peoples in the South. At least one sociologist has called for his colleagues to broaden their perspective to involve more direct focus on larger systems of social organization (Etzioni, 1970). This shift in emphasis does not preclude the study of smaller societal units or the neglect of other perspectives such as the demographic and social-psychological, but rather gives expanded attention to the larger organizational contexts within which these smaller units exist and to how they affect local institutions and groups. To accomplish this shift, the rural sociologist will need to 1) utilize a broader set of observational methods and 2) move to broad studies encompassing the linkages between levels of social organization. Greater effectiveness in dealing with general patterns of local and regional change along with a better understanding of the complex of interacting processes active in social change should result from such an approach. Specifically, rural sociologists in the South need to place more research emphasis on 1) Changes in social organization and interactional patterns and 2) Linkages between various levels of social organization.

Emerging patterns of change in the social organization are clearly contrary to the idealized conception of rural society as the stronghold of grass-roots democracy based on local autonomy and rugged individualism (Warren, 1963). Because the Southern United States has changed more slowly than other regions of the country with regards to these patterns, the traditional rural picture still maintains meaning. However, it seems clear that the South too is changing to a more urban pattern of organizational life and that the rate of change is occurring at an increasingly rapid pace. It appears also that the majority of rural peoples in the South from the driver of the pulpwood truck and the part-time farmer to the local politician recognize that things are changing and are no longer within their sphere of influence.

Some rural sociologists have proposed that the driving force behind rural social change resides in the transformed operation of key institutions such as education and government. One such change is embodied in the movement of key decision making away from the local community and from locally based systems of relationships (Sower and Miller, 1964). Both in explicitly organized public spheres of action and in many more subtly organized non-public spheres, the key decision-making process determining the critical life chances of small societal units are located outside the local area. Often there is only a vague notion among local people of where the critical decisions are actually made and who makes them. Evolving between the individual and the locus of authority is an increasingly complex organizational structure with overlapping responsibilities for given areas of concern. To understand what such social change holds for the rural South, there must be developed a thorough appreciation of the changing nature of vertical link-

ages between levels and types of organizations. More attention is needed to studies of regional configurations (Ford, 1966).

Rural communities have already lost their capacity to some extent to determine their own destinies. This erosion of local autonomy will increase and they will become more linked to and dominated by urban centers of social, economic and politic concentration. Rural sociologists in the South have done little research to determine the possible consequences of such changes on the quality of rural life. Particular attention should be directed to the ways in which local communities and their constituent sub-units are linked to and influenced by other social units of which they are a part.

Although no one expects to see the time when rural-urban life styles become one, it is expected that rural life styles will become increasingly urbanized (Copp, 1964). What is less clear is the kinds of conditions that will influence the extent to which this process occurs. The cultural ethos of self-determination and local autonomy characteristic of rural society provides a compelling incentive to consider the variety of research problems created by the urbanization process. Since we currently know little about the variability and consistency that exists in the patterned ways of life among contemporary rural communities in the South, it seems justified to emphasize descriptive studies of this order in future research undertakings.

Dramatic changes in social organization at the local level have resulted in increasingly complex patterns of intergroup relations, shifts from full-time to part-time or no farming, distinct rates of social deviance, to indicate but a few examples. Most of these and many other changes can be traced

to external pressures; but regardless of their initial source, these changes will precipitate others by affecting such things as the determinants of social rank, social norms and the structuring of influence and authority. There is a pressing need for rural sociologists to begin researching the consequences of such changes on the basic social fabric of all segments of the community. Research by rural sociologists is needed to identify points in the organizational structure where inefficiencies and blockages to meeting change occur. Change is an acknowledged fact of contemporary life in the rural South. The research challenge is to assist rural areas meet change in a manner that strengthens rather than depreciates the quality of rural life.

Conclusions

Rural sociology research in the South needs to confront the question of research priorities in order to more effectively meet the needs of its various client publics and especially the rural peoples and localities throughout the region. The process of determining research priorities for an applied science is not an easy one. An explicit examination of the practical potentials for research findings, the long-term contributions to scientific knowledge, and the normative stance involved all relate to this process.

In this statement an attempt has been made to review the current state of the art in rural sociology research. Much good work is being conducted, however at least some very suggestive theoretical orientations and methodological tools are either under- or un-utilized. One such theoretical orientation is that of social change as it applies to social organization with particular application to social structures and organizational

linkages. In order to employ the organizational orientation there must be a change in methodological emphasis to include the use of a more diverse assortment of research tools.

The use of case studies and longitudinal designs will increase the cost of doing research. Where will the additional funds come from for such studies? Over the years rural sociology has experienced difficulty in identifying specific client publics with sufficient economic or political influence to change the system for allocating research funds. The primary benefactors of rural sociological research are not highly organized groups such as the Cotton Producers Association or the Farm Bureau but the general public. Lacking direct ties to specific kinds of industries or public agencies which support such research either with funds or pressure, rural sociology has not been able to obtain its share of the available research monies. Thus, increased emphasis needs to be given to building into research activities a capacity for initiating and continuing communication with potential clients and users of the research results.

This statement has specified a limited set of substantive problem areas which embrace the current research activities of rural sociologists in the South. Within each of the six areas enumerated, a priority emphasis is possible using a theoretical orientation of social change in organizational structures and patterns of interaction. The challenge to rural sociologists in the South is to attempt using this orientation in their research activities and thereby provide an additional dimension that suggests exciting possibilities for problem solutions. By the same token, the Southern Agricultural Experiment Station Directors must realize that implementation of such a research thrust is more time consuming and more costly.

Finally, there is a continuing need to work intensively on developing a process for establishing research priorities. First, there needs to be a collaborative effort among rural sociologists to develop an organizational structure to exchange research information, to develop a broad framework of general priorities and to establish reciprocal communication with special publics (i.e., the Southern Agricultural Experiment Station Directors). The SRSRC provides one mechanism for achieving this goal. Second, there needs to be established a means for organizing effective working subgroups within the larger body of rural sociologists along lines of particular substantive problem areas. These smaller units can then establish more specific priorities relative to their general areas of interest and competence.

The establishing of priorities is a continuous process--it can never be finished. This report provides the basis for initiating an organized effort to channelize this process and a general framework for providing a basis for the direction of priority setting.

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